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Northfield makes strong comeback

By BOB ROBERTS
STAFF WRITER

Northfield Park, which nearly closed two years ago for lack of business, continued its comeback with a strong winter/spring meeting.

The 66-night harness session ended Wednesday night with impressive gains in attendance and betting. Attendance racketed 35% over 1985's figures as 230,186 took in the races. The average crowd was 2,534.

Betting for the session totaled $33,322,983, an increase of 24% over last year. The average nightly handle was $555,198.

"I've checked all the other tracks in America and these are the most impressive gains in the harness industry this year," said Gregg Mallet, Northfield's publicist.

Winners on the racetrack were Don O'Dwyer, tops among drivers, and Doug Hinkle, winningest trainer.

O'Dwyer, in capturing his third consecutive dash crown, drove 85 winners to easily outdistance Mel Turcotte (69) and Keith Kash (60).

Hinkle sent out 44 winners to outlast Joe Kramp (38) and Mark Corfido and Bill Ireslie (both at 35) in a tight conditioners' derby.

Northfield's 61-night summer meeting began last night with the popular Super Hi introduced as a $1 bet. The ultimate in exotic wagers had been a $2 bet during the winter/spring meeting.

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BOB ROBERTS
ON HORSE RACING

Attendance, bets soar at Northfield

There's obviously credence to Northfield Park's motto that "every 19 minutes the place goes crazy."

The Rt. 8 harness oval closed out its 61-program summer meeting Friday night with huge attendance and betting gains over last season.

The total pari-mutuel play of $22,179,398, a nightly average of $369,657, was 20.3% over 1985's figures.

The attendance increase was even more significant. The 190,050 paid admissions, a nightly average of 3,167, reflects a gain of 36.9% over last year's turnstile count.

"Our increases are record gains for the harness industry," said Tom Aldrich, Northfield's general manager. "The momentum has continued at Northfield, due mostly to our aggressive promotion and marketing. And our racing has been competitive, providing an interesting challenge for handicappers."

Aldrich doesn't believe Northfield has reached its full potential.

"It better not have," he said. "We have a long way to go. Our next goal is to average $400,000 a night."

NORTHFIELD NOTEBOOK — Don O'Dwyer, thanks to a five-bagger Thursday night, has wrapped up another driving title. He entered Friday night's finale with 84 winners in 60 programs. Dan Ross, the summer meeting pacesetter, had 47 winners. O'Dwyer won the winter/spring session with 85 winners ... Jerry Ross Jr. held a three-winner lead, 28-25, over Joe Kramp in the summer meeting's conditioners' derby.

Northfield's $56,000 invitational race, set for Sept. 20, finally has a name — The Summit. The one mile pace already has a field of six, headed by Ohio Sires Stakes champion Quite A Sensation ... Three simulcast races will be beamed this week, all Grand Circuit events, and all from Garden State Park. The top attraction figures Friday's $220,000 Matron, which should be the final tune for hopefuls for the Sept. 18 Little Brown Jug. By the way, Northfield will be dark on Jug Day.

THISTLEDOWN NOTEBOOK — The jockeys were in a feisty mood Thursday, as three claims of foul were entered in the first four races. The stewards didn't honor any of them, dismissing each cry of equine crime in a matter of seconds ... Valet Otis Jones became the first local licensee to test positive twice for a prohibited substance (either marijuana or cocaine), and was suspended by the Thistle stewards until enrolled in a rehabilitation program. Jones did just that Friday and has been reinstated.

Mrs. Harry Lindy, owner of Buckabye, upset winner of the $143,000 Governor's Buckeye Cup at River Downs last Sunday, called to say the colt is back in the hands of her son Malcolm at Thistledown. "My husband and I wanted him to have the horse because he had done such a great job of keeping him sound the last three years." Lindy added that Buckabye is being pointed for the Sept. 20 George Lewis Memorial at Thistledown, a race that honors the late handicapper of The Plain Dealer.

Esther McKee retired yesterday as secretary to the racing department. She spent 23 years at the track and estimates she typed nearly 5,000 overnights, the daily listing of horses entered to race ... Thistledown's outdoor paddock has been closed for landscaping, which should offer handicappers a better view of the horses being readied for action.

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